





For my granddaughters
India Meredith Saskia
&
Lily

*Books and cats and fair-haired little girls
make the best furnishings for a room.*

French Proverb



Footprints

*I am not a friend and I am not a servant.
I am the Cat who walks by himself.*

Rudyard Kipling

Lavender

LAVENDER WAS THE FIRST CAT WE EVER HAD and if I were not a confirmed addict, she might have been our last.

She was, we were told, a Russian Blue, though as she came with no written guarantee to that effect and we paid virtually nothing for her, we set little store by that. What we wanted was an uncomplicated moggy for a household with three small children. Lavender didn't meet any of those requirements. For a start, she never accepted the attentions of the children. As a kitten, her biting and scratching of small hands reaching out for her was excused. She would settle down, we thought, when the children learned not to grab at her. The children learned, Lavender did not. Her nervousness degenerated into bad temper and unprovoked viciousness.

At any occasion that could not be avoided, she was handled with stout leather gloves kept for the purpose. We once attempted to de-flea her according to printed instructions, 'Put the powder in an old pillow-slip, lower the cat into it and holding the open end around the cat's neck, gently pat the bag.' It is not, in fact, a method I would recommend with even the calmest of cats. With Lavender finally lowered—not a word that springs to mind—into the bag, in seconds the pillowslip was in shreds, our noses filled with flea-powder and Lavender had become airborne, leaving two scratched pairs of arms in her trail.

We lost count of the number of warnings issued too late, to cat-loving visitors who stroked her. Our Danish neighbour who had fed her for a fortnight while we were on holiday, rashly assumed she had finally made a friend of Lavender. The scab on her slowly healing nose remained a witness to the contrary for days after our return. 'I have such a respect for that cat,' our neighbour commented; we think her limitation in English usage might have accounted for the mildness of her comment.

She was not a cat we should have kept with small children, but we didn't know anyone we disliked enough to give her to, and having her put down was never an option; she was young and healthy and I suppose we were irredeemably optimistic.

She showed a hesitant affection for me, but throughout her long life had to share me with various children and animals she resented. Her greatest pleasure was to find me unusually alone in my bath—because usually I had company for that bit of self-indulgence, each of my children having realised that it was a good time for a private chat. Lavender understood this too and she would come in, sit on the carpet and 'talk' to me in a strange language all her own. It was not purring and certainly not meowing and I have never heard any other cat make a sound like it.

One bitterly cold night when she was almost twenty, she was inadvertently shut out of doors for almost two hours, unable to jump up to the cat flap. We found her in the dog kennel stiff with cold, and dribbled warm milk into her mouth. And she let us. She let us tuck her into her basket with a hot-water bottle and didn't complain when we moved her to a warm radiator. I think she had decided it was time to die and hung on for another two days simply to relish the attention finally being lavished on her.



*To be sure you can curl up with a good cat,
but that doesn't mean you understand a cat.
A dog is like Dickens.*

Roy Blount, Jnr.

Candy

OUR FIRST DOG WAS A YELLOW LABRADOR. Candy was not a name we gave her, because she was already eight years old when she came to us—a retired breeding bitch for whom her owners had no further use.

She was already overweight and, in our ignorance then, we made no attempt to control her appetite, blissfully unaware of the dangers of obesity in babies let alone dogs. We were culpable too in our intolerance of her developing tendency to incontinence, not understanding that with her strong desire to please she would have obliged us in that too, if she had been able.

Labradors are by nature steady, sensible animals and in addition she showed no inclination to chase after anything. This was a blessing since it was seldom necessary to put her on a lead. Her walks with me were invariably in the company of a baby in a pram and a toddler in tow, and even a young mother of two infants is equipped with only one pair of hands. She ambled, or rather waddled contentedly alongside this entourage, never straying off or halting regularly for that characteristic marking irritatingly familiar to owners of mature male dogs.

As a breed Labradors are legendary with children, responsible baby-sitters and faithful guards. We appreciated her gentle loyalty, her docile tolerance of our infants crawling all over her, her intense gratitude at our affection for her. She had a lovely nature and we loved her. It is only with hindsight we know we could have been kinder to her if only by not killing her with kindness. She loved to share an ice cream with us, or a bar of chocolate. She was given, over and above what we fed her, any leftovers from their table by our neighbour who was very fond of her, a fondness reciprocated, of course. And eager for food as any Labrador, she ate everything she was offered.

We were guilty through our ignorance too in how she died a few years later.

We were about to move from Wales to the London area and needed to house-hunt unencumbered with a large dog. We already had two small children and the friends who had offered to accommodate us had no further room. We left Candy to be fed by our neighbour, put her bed in our open garage and gave her the run of the garden; it was June and the weather warm. We thought that sufficient care for her needs, but her needs were not confined to food, shelter and a warm bed. She needed us too and we had no idea of the depth of that need. A week in the life of a dog is a long time, though it went quickly enough for us. We had never been away from her before. How was she to know we would come back? She had been unwanted once before. We know she pined for us; a second not-so-kind neighbour told us so.

She died shortly before we returned, her body still warm where it lay in the drive. It was undoubtedly her heart that failed, but whether that failure was physical or emotional is not something we'll ever know. What we were sure of, is that we had failed her.



*The man in the park with a lead in his
hand and no dog in sight owns a beagle.*

Dog Book

Cider

CIDER WAS YOUR TYPICAL BEAGLE: friendly, laid-back, devil-may-care, but with rather more than a Beagle's normal interest in food. Having been the runt of the litter, she was wholly and always convinced that food was about to go off the menu.

All her life she was an incorrigible thief, dustbin scavenger . . . and escape artist. No neighbour's dustbin or open kitchen door was safe from her predatory incursions, and we were constantly crawling with apologies for her behaviour.

For seven of the fourteen years of her life we lived in a modern town house with a kitchen opening onto a small patio flanked with seven foot high walls. A gate set into an equally high fence led to communal gardens surrounded by identical patios similarly fenced off. The difference between our fence and the attractive white woodwork of our neighbours' was that ours bore more than a passing resemblance to a cage designed to incarcerate a Barbary ape. But still Cider escaped, mostly by tunnelling out with all the ingenuity and determination of a Colditz escapee. Her aim was to get into all those patios not wired or booby-trapped and through any kitchen door left invitingly open. She was seen all too frequently making off with a string of sausages, or a carton of yoghurt rammed on her nose, its raspberry or banana flavoured drips leading back to base. She once, we were told, rose from nowhere, like Jaws surfacing from the ocean, to intercept a rasher of bacon being transferred from pan to plate, leaving the disbelieving cook with an empty fork in his hand.

She could open a fridge door with her nose, operate a pedal bin with her paw and ingest, in passing, any food remotely within reach. On one occasion two dozen cocktail sausages disappeared off a party table, leaving as many cocktail sticks on an empty plate—in just the time it took to answer the doorbell. One Christmas she returned from yet another unlicensed foray, with a grossly distended stomach, and lay digesting its contents for almost a day, giving every anti-social indication that the process was far from easy. By this time we had moved to a detached house with a large garden and were grateful for the greater anonymity these features afforded, because we thought Cider looked suspiciously like a stuffed turkey and wondered guiltily if someone's festive table lacked that particular feature of Christmas fare.

The children of course adored her. She was philosophic about being pushed around in an old doll's pram, dressed appropriately in bonnet and shawl, or street-cool posing in shades and slouch hat. Her jealousy of any fluffy toy animal she tore apart didn't distress children who had outgrown their dependency on a particular favourite. They were more of an age to hoot hilariously at her Beagle tendency to roll in whatever vile smell she could find, be it cow pat or dead fish.

Her ending was mercifully quick, raiding a food bin only hours before being put to sleep for an inoperable cancer over which she had shown no previous distress. And in spite of the headaches she'd given us, we waved no flag when she died.



Cats know how not to get ulcers.

R. A. Caras

Gladstone



Gladstone's Papa

GLADSTONE HAS APPEARED BEFORE IN ONE OF MY BOOKS but it is right that his story should be included in this chronicle of pets.

Our Gladstone was not a figure of political or historical interest, but a lovable, portly Persian cat who, when he died, left a considerable gap in our lives. Anyone who had met his sire would not have asked why we named such a pretty kitten as we did. His father was a splendid animal, of champion repute, large and rather cross looking; it seems a well-defined scowl was just what Gladstone lacked to make him a champion—because he came with a pedigree unmatched by any of his owners! He was large, grey and whiskery enough when he was older to justify his name, but as for his disposition, we often called him just 'Gladly'.

He was not the brightest of cats, nor the most graceful. Getting himself stuck up a tree was not, in his case, a feline trick to gain attention, but a genuine inability to appreciate that what goes up must come down, and not necessarily bottom first, flailing wildly at trunk and branch in a descent as undignified as it was ungainly. Or hanging ignominiously from a branch by two desperately clinging front paws, with a great weight of dangling posterior about to prove the irrefutability of the law of gravity. And when he finally dropped like a stone, no one had ever explained to him that cats always land on their feet.

Gladstone could leap for a five-foot fence—and miss. We were somewhat baffled therefore, by his prowess as a hunter. As far as birds were concerned, we suspected he fell off branches, flattening his prey by accident rather than design. Not all the birds he caught, we reasoned, could have been blind cripples afflicted with deafness, and the sheer displacement of air, as that enormous mound of fur charged up the garden, must have given ample warning to any bird that didn't fall into that category. We had, I should point out, eschewed collars with bells, wholly convinced of his capacity to hang himself in his tree-climbing escapades. He presented us more laudably with rats he caught in the churchyard next door, and sometimes they were dead.

He was surely the greediest of cats. Having devoured his own food, he would move in, if unchecked, on the other cat's dish, literally closing his eyes to her outraged clouts while he consumed whatever she had not managed to eat, in the race to dispose of at least some of what was rightfully hers, before he had demolished what was rightfully his.

When it came to thieving, he was truly amoral. It was impossible to instil in him any sense of wrongdoing. If there was food, it was surely meant for him—whether Christmas turkey or the tasty snack you were about to eat before he did. Hurt surprise at our annoyance, or even fury, was his invariable reaction. He had tremendous charm and he relied absolutely, and with good reason, on that stock-in-trade.

His saving grace was that his appetite for food was matched by his appetite for loving. Late afternoon he appeared from whatever basket—his own, or the other cat's—or dog kennel, or large pottery bowl, he had decided to spend his day in, and demand affection. His timing was based, originally, of course, on the children's arrival home from school, but he failed to notice that the pattern changed as the children grew up and went different ways. Around four o'clock was his time for loving, as surely as he knew when mealtimes were, and he demanded both, loudly and unmistakably. And when you picked him up, you could never have wished for a more rewarding lump of rapturous purring fur to cuddle.

He died bleakly on a vet's operating table, without any of us realising how ill he was. Indeed, most of the family were away in that last week of his life and we were left with that miserable guilt that we were not there for him.

A few months later I was given a pair of Burmese kittens, and with quiet treachery I lost my heart to them. But so that my betrayal should not be absolute, I made a book—for myself, for my family, and more importantly, for Gladstone.

*By and large, people who enjoy teaching
animals to roll over will find themselves
happier with a dog.*

Barbara Holland

Bryn

CANDY WAS NOT THE ONLY LABRADOR to have shared our lives. When my husband resigned from a company he had been with for some years, he was offered the usual kind of leaving present: a watch, an expensive fountain pen, some desk paraphernalia. To the delight of his colleagues, he asked for a Labrador pup.

He was, when he came to us, a glossy black rotund little bear of a pup, as funny and adorable as any young thing, though besotted owners are inclined to believe these qualities peculiar to their own canine darling. We called him Bryn—Welsh for a small mountain.

He was slow to be toilet-trained, which wasn't helped by the fact that we had just moved to a large Victorian house badly in need of a central heating system, so that the bare floor boards and builder's rubble seemed indistinguishable from out of doors to a not remarkably bright puppy. He was also slow learning not to chew furniture, slippers, toys or anything else lying around and was left to do so too often, as I spent much of my time up ladders in other rooms, painting and decorating, while the children were in school. He was such a lovable, affectionate animal, so eager to please in all the ways he could understand, it was easy to forgive behaviour not uncommon in youngsters of all species.

He matured into a reliable, sunny-tempered gentleman, never sulky, never taking offence, taking in his stride the rough and tumble of a growing family, wanting nothing more than to be a part of it. What he loved most was to lie, not just at my feet, but across them, when I sat down in the evening.

As a retriever, what he excelled in, was retrieving; it was after all what he'd been bred for. We would take him uphill walking and then endlessly throw a ball downhill for him to retrieve, hoping eventually to exhaust his boundless energy; but our own was always exhausted before his, and we feared he would drop dead from heart failure before his enthusiasm flagged.

His only fault was his almost uncontrollable urge to chase cats, not our own, one of whom was a fluffy kitten who slept with him, the other our elderly harridan, Lavender, who soon made it clear he chased her at his peril. But he gave chase to every other cat who ventured into our garden or invitingly ran away from him when out for walks. I think it was nothing more than a Pavlovian impulse to retrieve them, but fortunately we never found out what would happen if he caught up with one: cats are built for speed and he was not. It was an impulse that was to prove fatal. As a result of our negligence on one occasion, he chased a cat across our road and was hit by a car.

He wasn't killed outright and, indeed, wasn't marked at all. Obedient as ever he jumped into the back of our estate car when told to, even though he had suffered a fatal internal injury. We left him at the vet's 'just for observation', without knowing that we had left him there to die without any of us being with him. He was just two years old and we were devastated.



*Cats are always elegant... each
possesses one supremely simple
outfit which never wears out.*

John Weitz

Ajax & Abbie

THE MOTHER OF AJAX AND ABBIE was a pure-bred Burmese who went astray, as high class ladies sometimes will, and came back pregnant.

When they first came to us, they were almost identical but within a week it was clear that Ajax was going to be about twice the size of Abbie and half as bright. She spent almost two days teaching him how to use a cat flap—a skill she had mastered in minutes. He bullied her, she out-witted him, and in between they curled up lovingly together in the same basket—especially if the weather was cold.

Abbie was an expert hunter and rather more conventional in her choice of prey than her brother, who in the course of a week, brought in a whole family of toads, Grandfather Toad looking singularly unimpressed at being deposited a fourth time on our living room carpet. We were guiltily grateful our neighbour never saw our grey predator frequently returning from their goldfish pond with an orange tail protruding from the side of his mouth. Squirrels' tails decorated our kitchen floor from time to time and one Christmas he generously laid a large dead rat underneath the Christmas tree, tastefully displayed along with the presents.

But what Ajax liked best was fighting. He must have spent half his adult life sporting a plastic flowerpot around his neck to allow the many sewn up gashes he acquired, to heal. But there were no wounds on his rump; he was the neighbourhood champion—or gangster, depending from whose perspective you viewed his prowess. Once, at the vet's with our dog, I commiserated with the owner of a one-eyed, one-eared chocolate coloured Burmese, and I was rash enough to mention that we had a part-Burmese, but that he was grey. She rounded on me like a rattlesnake and demanded to know if we lived in her road. And we did. It seemed she knew Ajax only too well!

When we moved to rural Wales, he was very confused. Confined at first to the house and the largest litter tray we could find he usually managed to deposit over the side what he then tried scrupulously to bury inside. One fiercely stormy day, after the litter tray had finally been taken away, he waited too long for the rain to stop and dashed desperately up the attic in pursuit of me, leapt on a spare bed and relieved himself at length, clearly grateful that I'd finally provided him with a litter tray large enough to accommodate him.

The world outside was equally confusing. The big black farm cat who was used to sheltering in our carport on wet nights was at first a problem, until they came to an understanding: they both sprayed our front door to indicate that that was where the line of tolerance was drawn. And an intolerably powerful line it was. The cows in the field behind our house were, however, the final straw. Ajax decided if they were the opposition, there was no contest. Our champion hung up his gloves and underwent a complete change of character, seldom venturing now from his own garden. Our affectionate, lazy old cat, still fond of his food, is huge, and that size is not now all bone and muscle.



Abbie however was so small and sleek she was once unkindly described as a rat in grey satin. She was playful, sweet natured, very bright and as affectionate as her brother but, being a female feline—on her own terms. She was philosophic about Ajax's bullying and the pushiness of our big Ridgeback, who was inclined to adopt the role of Policeman Plod in their feline skirmishes, and always backed what he took to be the winning side. Except that Abbie acknowledged no defeat, always managing a final pounce on Ajax and a swift swipe at Magnus's nose before making off with an alacrity Ajax could never match or to a position he couldn't reach.

She was not a cat to wander out onto the road, but that is where she was found, hit by a passing car while we had been out for the day. Miserably we prepared to bury her that evening at the bottom of our garden. When I came indoors to find a cloth to wrap her in, a small bird flew in with me to our upstairs living room where it circled around the beams showing no panic and no inclination to leave by the windows. As it swooped gracefully around I noticed that our dog watched as calmly as if it had been Abbie performing her tricks, and in my distressed state I had the odd feeling that it was Abbie, come to say goodbye. When we had buried her, the bird had gone.

We hadn't told our granddaughters about the bird, and neither had our daughter, but the children were sweetly sympathetic about Abbie when we visited the following weekend. My husband is invariably sceptical about supernatural interpretations attributed to what he considers mere coincidences, but he was taken aback when five year old Meredith informed him privately, 'You know, Taid, some people believe that when you die, if you've been a bad person you come back as something nasty but if you've been a good person you can come back as a bird or a butterfly.'

A comforting thought but we missed her sorely nevertheless.

*The only real problem with the Weimaraner
as a breed is that he is often more intelligent
than the person who owns him.*

Dog Book

Theo

The Dramatist

*Theo's in the garden
dancing round our ancient Beagle,
inviting her to join his capering,
chasing shadows on the wall.*

*Regardless of a clownish fall
he races off in full abandon
recklessly as wanton Phaethon
rode the chariot of the sun.*

*Suddenly he stops and stiffens,
right paw raised, intently listens.
He stalks a rotten apple which he
tosses and shakes ferociously before
crouching to eat it—thoughtfully.*

A WEIMARANER AT FULL SPEED has been described as 'poetry in motion'. Certainly Theo, a streak of silver grey leaping over a ditch or across open ground was an impressive sight. He seemed, even at full speed, to be able to move up again into what we called his fifth gear. Unfortunately this gear was seldom brought into use in response to a call to heel, but reserved for the pursuit of another dog. Because in his youth, our friendly, handsome aristocrat almost invariably harboured murderous intentions towards any other dog of size and we were always nervous that terriers, known more for courage than common sense, might be foolish enough to stand their ground with him. We used to scan the park anxiously for signs of canine activity before unleashing him, until he responded in time to a recommended change of diet . . . or he overheard our vet's more drastic advice.

This last is not entirely a joke. Theo, in fact, seemed to understand everything we said and could do anything he was taught—provided it was what he wanted to do. He learned all the usual doggy tricks with dismissive facility. When he was still only three months old he could open the kitchen door with ease and obligingly close it behind him, if reminded. He understood W.A.L.K. spelt out in a carefully conversational tone, not directed at him, and had such a vocal range of his own, we joked we could teach him English if he lived long enough. And our French cleaning lady, who adored him, insisted he understood French and seldom spoke to him in any other language.



Unlike our Beagle, he was absolutely trustworthy, never stole or even helped himself to the odd biscuit left on a coffee table. He even, on one occasion, stood guard over a joint of ham expertly filched by her from the kitchen table. That unscrupulous little thief regarded him with frustrated disbelief as he refused to allow her near it and **DIDN'T EAT IT HIMSELF**. When the ham had been rescued and Theo duly praised, he allowed himself a somewhat smug glance in her direction, having added moral superiority to all the other forms in which he was superior to our amoral, incorrigible and fat little Beagle.

One cat just leads to another.

Hemingway

Tamil, Nadu
&
Twiglet

TAMIL AND NADU WERE THE FIRST ANIMAL LOVES of our eldest daughter and her husband-to-be, who came back from an extended trip to India as besotted with that country as they were with each other. Hence the names: Tamil and Nadu, for a pair of black and white kittens who shared their lives, their salt and vinegar crisps, their barbecued Pringles, their olives and chocolates.

When Tamil went missing, after a year, his distraught owners trailed around their neighbourhood every evening rattling tins of cat food, calling his name and posting notices. He turned up after a month, overweight and overfond of staying indoors with a new-found attachment to the litter tray. Nadu's claim to fame was as an expert flycatcher. She could balance on the palm of a hand and would dart up to catch the fly more like a lizard than a cat, crunch it, swallow it and then leap about as though the fly were buzzing about inside her. Yet Nadu, the intrepid flycatcher and Tamil, the adventurer, behaved like cautious metropolitans on safari whenever they came to rural Wales. At every visit they crept timidly round our well-hedged garden as though a lion lurked behind every rose bush.

But when they were four years old their cosy, inclusive world was shattered, and a lifetime of displacement began for Tamil and Nadu. The first baby arrived and the cats were devastated. Nadu approached the cot with her tail the shape of a lavatory brush, then stalked away in disgust.

They called their first child India, though her godfather scoffed at naming her after a sub-continent. A strong, confident baby, she crawled at an early age and the cats learned late that moving a few feet away was not a long-term solution when pursued by a really resolute infant. By the time the next baby, Meredith, had begun crawling, even earlier than her sister, the cats had learned that the safest refuges in the house were two flights of stairs up, and the safety short-lived. When a boisterous Labrador puppy, called Daisy, arrived, the cats moved out to the high walls in the garden where they at least had the satisfaction of tormenting the dog, until she was safely penned in during the evening and the children in bed, before they ventured back into the house. They faced the arrival of the third baby, Saskia, with stoicism bred from experience, though their quality time had shrunk from hours to minutes in the course of each day.

A new kitten was the last straw for Tamil and Nadu, and philosophical acceptance gave way to outrage. The children called him Twiglet. Lithe and lean, like a miniature grey and white ocelot he was always going to be a star attraction, an irresistible comedian adept at running up walls and curtains, chairbacks and chimneys, performing crab walks sideways, darting out from unexpected places to the delight of the children. His response to their teasing was to chase after them on his hind legs boxing their retreating ankles, their shrieks of laughter provoking him to acts bordering on dementia. Mischievous and irreverent as all kittens he found endless ways to disturb the equanimity of eleven year old cats, too dignified to chase him, too aware they could never catch him if they did.



*Cats are dainty patricians, whereas
dogs, whatever their social status ...
are irredeemably vulgar.*

Pierre Loti

Magnus

HIS NOSE BEING LEVEL WITH A MAN'S CROTCH, the canine bonding of our enormous Ridgeback is predictably embarrassing. His ploy with women is to goose them from behind. Since we have never succeeded in controlling these impulses, we tend to shut him away until our guests are safely seated. Dog books offer little help on this subject.

In any case, Magnus doesn't consider advice given in dog-books has anything remotely to do with him. 'A Rhodesian Ridgeback can take any weather and go twenty four hours without water,' the book claims. Being a dog whose ancestors came from South Africa, he understandably dislikes cold weather, but he doesn't stand the heat very well either, and he loathes getting wet. He is miserable in heavy rain, thinks paddling in streams overrated, and once when he slipped off a wall into the river, total panic overtook him. I was afraid he would drown and he was certain of it. We risked complete immersion ourselves, getting him out.

'Ridgebacks are the Houdinis of the canine world,' the dog-book further declares, advocating high fences. Providently we had ours raised from five feet to six all round our rather large garden—an exercise as superfluous as it was expensive. Magnus is the most earth-bound dog we've ever had! He is a big dog, even for a Ridgeback, but he balks at even a three-foot stile and is too big to squeeze through the dog gate sometimes helpfully incorporated in them. We have noticed however, that he is suddenly transformed into Pegasus if offered a biscuit and he is trapped behind a sofa.

One point on which the book is absolutely correct is that the Ridgeback is a hardhead, suffering more than most dogs from that convenient canine deafness that afflicts them at inconvenient times. He will comply with a demand if he considers it reasonable but on the whole prefers decisions jointly made. You would never get him for instance to jump through a burning hoop. With Magnus it's a case of, give him an order and he will give it his earnest consideration. He accepts he is not allowed on furniture, but if really interesting company is present he expects to be part of it and seats his enormous backside next to a favoured visitor. The fact that his paws are still on the floor even if his rear is taking up much of the chair or sofa seems to him a reasonable accommodation.

He gets on well with cats and with other dogs, and although not raised with sheep, has adapted to living in an area where it is hard to avoid them. He expects sheep to give way, however, as a mark of respect and is prepared to 'spook' any of the bolder sort who stand their ground. After he has scattered them with no more than a quick dart in their direction, he turns aside with a palpable smirk of satisfaction.

Magnus takes his guarding duties seriously and sensibly, but he looks and sounds so formidable we avoid unnecessary introductions with casual callers. One regular tradesman, however, with a self-confessed fear of dogs, likes reassurance that 'the dog' is safely indoors when he calls. One stormy October day, his head bent against the driving rain, he made his way confidently up our drive secure in the knowledge that 'the dog' would



not be out in such weather. I was stooping to pick up leaves in the car-port and my rising to meet him unhappily coincided with Magnus's loud reaction as the man passed the window where our trusty porter had probably stationed himself as soon as he heard the van arrive. 'Oh my God!' cried the poor man, 'Oh Christ!' But before he called on any further divine aid, he realised that my sudden appearance and Magnus's fierce barking were not connected. 'Oh God,' he blurted out, 'I thought you was the dog'. And then, in a manly attempt at humour, considering he was still trembling, he looked down at himself, clad head to foot in yellow oilskins, and added, 'I mean, he could have mistaken me for a b . . . b . . . bloody banana!'

My cat is a lion in a jungle of small bushes

English Proverb

Tabitha

TABITHA WAS ALREADY TWO YEARS OLD when she came to us, her owners army people faced with an unexpected overseas posting. Her classic tabby markings were black and lustrous, the light areas not grey or brown but grey-green like the leaves of a willow, her eyes a paler green.

But if Tabitha was beautiful her manners were not. She had had to hold her own in a household of several children, three cats and a large dog, her milieu an army camp. She was un-phased by the size of our enormous Ridgeback, and having tolerated his overly intimate examination, she sashayed against his leg, like a miniature Mae West purring, 'Hello, Big Boy.' But Ajax, she decided, posed more of a threat, and on the principle that attack was the best form of defence, she arched her back, spat and launched such a screeching invective at him, our large, dignified Burmese recoiled in horror. His sister had been a lady who had raised her voice to him on only one occasion, when a big farm tomcat barged in through our cat flap and from the top of the freezer she had screamed at him, 'Fire! Rape! Do something, you booby!' But her tone was dulcet compared to Tabitha's and he had been able to save face by driving off the tomcat. He didn't know how to deal with Tabitha in any dignified way. She shouldn't, he knew in his bones, be speaking to him like that. It was his home. He was there first. He was BIGGER. With as much composure as he could command he hurried out of the house to attend to urgent matters, sulking when I tried to console him.

That evening Tabitha appropriated his place on my lap, purring loudly enough to make the cat next door jealous, let alone one sitting glowering at her two feet away. She appropriated his food bowl and growled ferociously at him if he tried to reclaim his own. She took to sleeping on the stairs, a manoeuvre clearly designed to unsettle him and growling when he slid gingerly past her.

He stood this behaviour for a week and then he boxed her ears. As if she had been waiting for him to assert himself and indicate where her place was in the house's hierarchy, her aggressive behaviour gave way to a grudging deference—not always maintained.

She was a singularly hardy little cat; her chosen place not a warm corner or a vacant cat basket but a wooden chair in an exposed position at the top of the stairs rather like a sentinel. Her owners had said of her mother, Willow, 'Oh, she's a real trooper, been all over with us.' Tabitha was certainly made of sterner stuff than any cat we've ever known, prepared to brave wind and rain, or plod through mud and wet grass to share our walks in the fields.

Our lovely, fearless little cat finally ventured across our unforgiving country road but never got to explore the fields across it. The driver probably didn't even see her but she was killed instantly and almost unmarked.



*Cats are like Baptists. They raise hell,
but you can't catch them at it.*

Anonymous

The Saga
of
Mr. Socks

ONE SUMMER'S DAY, A FEW YEARS AGO, we discovered a wretched, emaciated black and white cat in the corner of our laundry. We assumed he was very sick and very old and had chosen the empty cat basket there as a suitable place to die. Our cats thought so too and tactfully ignored him. One eye had disappeared behind a purulent yellow marble, a shoulder wound festered horribly and he could hardly walk.

Later, he submitted patiently and unsedated to the vet's probing, squeezing and injecting, and was pronounced to be about two years old! He continued to be a perfect patient in the week that followed, happy to remain in our tool shed, ensconced in the cat basket he had chosen, fed and dosed with antibiotics. Friendly, affectionate even, he was clearly not a feral or even a farm cat but we were unsuccessful in our attempts to identify his owners and at the end of another week we returned to the vet and had him neutered. Our daughter had offered him a home provided we could hold on to him until she could come from London to collect him. We called him Socks.

A cat flap was installed in our tool shed and he availed himself of the freedom to come and go without attempting to invade the house. In fact we never saw him, though the food I put down for him continued to disappear, until shortly after our neighbours went away for a few days. I was looking after their cat, a small female who suddenly developed the appetite of an Irish navvy; I looked for Socks! Their bedroom doors were shut and there was no sign of him anywhere else. Then their cat's appetite seemed restored to normal, though Socks's food was still untouched in our tool shed, and he was missing.

Our poor neighbours returned at 2 a.m. a few mornings later, with friends who were staying overnight. When they were shown into the guest bedroom, a distraught Socks rushed out and so did a powerful stench. Somehow he had managed to shut himself in, and judging by the state of the room, he'd been there several days. A situation best imagined, though it was described, and in graphic detail.

We were very relieved when our daughter drove him off to his new home. He settled down elevated to 'Mr.' Socks by our three-year-old granddaughter, Lily, who tended to hug rather more passionately than he found comfortable, but he was gentle and tolerant with her. Unfortunately, the weekend after he arrived the family had to go to Somerset and Socks was left in the care of a live-in cat lover. As they loaded up the car he displayed a common feline reaction to stress by peeing all over Lily's duvet.

Events took a decided turn for the worse when they arrived home a few days later with a very sick Lily, who had contracted a bad case of Foot and Mouth Disease, something we mistakenly believed afflicted only farm animals. Fractious and feverish she wanted her mummy to sleep with her that night in her bed. Her mummy woke some hours later conscious that her feet were all wet, and so was that ill-starred duvet. Having done his worst, Socks had disappeared. Lily didn't want to wake up for the bedding to be changed and didn't want to go back to sleep after it was changed. Our daughter did not harbour very charitable feelings towards Socks that night.



The following day, still reeling after a dreadful night, that same long-suffering daughter was too embarrassed to take the sodden, malodorous duvet back again to the cleaners but put it in her washing machine, which duly flooded the kitchen floor. Having extracted it from the uncooperative machine, mopped up and rung out the duvet, she transferred it to her tumble dryer, which also objected and belched ominous smoke from over heating. That night and in the nights to come, Socks, locked out of the bedrooms, complained loudly, continuously and audibly whether he was shut in the house or put outside.

As Lily's health improved however so did Socks's behaviour. He became a handsome, good-natured and well-adjusted cat, but sadly the story doesn't end on a happy-ever-after note. Two years later he contracted a fatal illness and died as sick and wasted as the day we found him in our laundry. But well loved.



In Footprints I have traced the lives of all our family pets over a period of almost forty years. I have, I should say, confined myself to the various cats and dogs who have enriched all our lives, since I have never managed to form a meaningful relationship with a hamster or a goldfish.

The eleven monographs were set at Gwasg Gregynog, in 16-point Baskerville typeface, and printed, letterpress, by me in grey ink on Rives mouldmade paper. The eleven illustrations are grey and black mezzotints, interleaved with Rakusui Veil. The title page mezzotint figures a grey tabby, called Twig, looking uncharacteristically wistful, at a silver moon.

This is copy 9 of an edition of forty, with four extra designated copies for our four grand-daughters.

Shirley Jones '01



